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Published in:
Antipode

DOI:
10.1111/anti.12414

Publication date:
2019

Citation for published version (APA):
Fois, F. (2019). Enacting experimental alternative spaces. *Antipode*, *51*(1), 107-128. https://doi.org/10.1111/anti.12414

Enacting experimental alternative spaces

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Published in Antipode (2018); e-print.

Abstract

This paper analyses the experimental nature of alternative spaces and the affective, emotional and embodied experience their enactment generates. In so doing, it grounds the analysis on the intentional community of Damanhur (Italy), as an example of experimental spaces. Scholarship concerning intentional communities draws on utopian studies that consider them as utopian laboratories. More recently non-representational approaches have emphasized the processual nature of utopias, yet studies have overlooked the experimental nature of these alternative spaces. Drawing upon in-depth ethnographic data, this paper engages with community experimentations that took place in Damanhur for residents and visitors. It illustrates how utopian enactment is experimental and thus, disordering, unsettling and creative. Moreover, I argue that experimentations are not limited to unsettling the social structure of the organisation but rather that in studying the enactment of an alternative space emphasis should also be on their capacity to affect the individual.

Key words: Alternative spaces, Utopianism, Intentional communities, Experiments, Everyday practices, Damanhur

Introduction

In the last decades, there has been a growing scholarly interest in alternative spaces from both theoretical and empirical perspectives. With alternative spaces, I refer to spaces that by experimentally enacting socio-ethical and counter-cultural practices attempt to alter, challenge and resist mainstream economic, cultural and/or political institutions and discourses. In this paper, I will focus on the overlooked process of experimental enactment that takes place in these alternative spaces.

Within Geography, Gibson-Graham (1996, 2006, 2008) has offered the most influential contributions in the field of diverse economies with the aim to (re)think economy beyond hegemonic capitalist practices. Their ground-breaking works have undoubtedly reinforced an existing trend which aimed, first, to understand alterity and what it means to be alternative and second, to show the variegated forms in which alternative places, spaces and networks exist and intersect in different geographical contexts (see Leyshon *et al*., 2003, Fuller *et al*., 2010, Fickey, 2011, Roelvink *et al*., 2015). Such studies have looked at alternative forms of consumption such as car boot sales (Crewe and Gregson, 1998); retro retailers (Crewe at al., 2003); local exchange trading schemes and complementary currencies (North and Huber, 2004, North, 2005, North, 2007); postcolonial alternative banking systems (Pollard and Samers, 2007) and alternative trading spaces (Hughes, 2005). Additionally, Pickerill and Chatterton (2006, 731) introduce the concepts of 'autonomous geographies' to explore alter-globalisation movements. Autonomous geographies are spaces "where people desire to constitute non-capitalist, egalitarian and solidaristic forms of political, social, and economic organization through a combination of resistance and creation" (Pickerill and Chatterton, 2006, 730). These are considered radical collective projects which aim to build decentralised self-managed spaces through everyday practice.

Such accounts often mention the processual, experimental and dynamic nature of these spaces. For instance, Pickerill and Chatterton discuss how the negotiation process of autonomous geographies is "in the making" (2010, 488), how these "spaces are (re)made and (re)constituted" (2006, 743) and "based around ongoing examples and experiments which attempt to find and expand the future in the present" (2005, 9). Similarly, Gibson-Graham reminds us how "building community economies will always be a process of experimentation, choices and failures" (2006, 191). Although experiments are often mentioned, I argue that investigations on alterity do not directly focus on the process of experimentation that is taking place in such spaces, even if, I suggest, this is one of the most crucial aspects. The concept of experimentation is often used to explain failures, or to justify those utopian goals which are not-yet achieved, or again to explain the interstitial and controversial nature of autonomous spaces. However, the concept is underdeveloped especially in reference to alterity. Longhurst (2015) on the other hand, recognises the crucial significance of experimentations in analysing sustainable innovation. Drawing upon regional

studies, Longhurst (2013) argues that an 'alternative milieu' provides an adequate fertile environment for different sustainable experiments such as Local Exchange Trading Schemes (LETS), alternative food networks and permaculture projects. In other words, a dense network of alternative actors located in a specific location "creates the socio-cognitive space for experiments to emerge by stretching the socially accepted (and constructed) boundaries of possibility" (Longhurst, 2015, 190). In agreeing that an alternative milieu supports the emergence of social experimentations, I will instead show how experiments enact alternative spaces. I will do this by using intentional communities as an exemplary type of alternative spaces, and more specifically, the intentional community of Damanhur located in North-West Italy.

The paper proceeds by conceptualising intentional communities, firstly, as sites of social experimentation and, secondly, as utopian laboratories. Expanding on recent non-representational influences on utopianism (Anderson, 2002, Anderson 2006a, Kraftl, 2007, Garforth, 2009), I argue that experimentation can be investigated through an analysis of everyday practices and their affective, emotional and embodied impacts. Thirdly, the paper discusses the methodological framework adopted and how experimentation can further be understood through experience (McCormack, 2010) by using an auto-ethnographic approach. After contextualising the community of Damanhur, I draw upon community experimentation to show how the utopian enactment is disordering, unsettling and creative in these alternative spaces. However, I argue that experimentations are not limited to the social structure of the organisation but, additionally, have an intrinsic capacity of unsettling the self. Only in capturing the affective, embodied and non-representational self-experience does it become possible to fully understand the extent to which alternative spaces are experimental and how social change is firstly an individual process.

Experimental intentional communities

Experimentation is a concept that, though increasingly in use within social sciences, has a stronger connection with scientific disciplines. Laboratories are often considered as the sites *par excellence* where experiments are performed to prove or disprove assumptions from fields such as physics, chemistry or biology. According to Gross (2009, 82), "experimentation is not only regarded as a constitutive element of modern science in general, but is even

understood as its distinguishing characteristic when compared with forms of knowledge and methods of discovery prior to the 17th century". However, experimentations have never achieved the same relevance and importance in social sciences due to the uncontrollability and complexity of the social phenomena, the lack of universal social laws and the unethical issues of doing experiments with human beings (Gross and Krhon, 2005, Gross, 2009). The term 'social experiments' started to be used from late 19th century, mainly to support the recognition and institutionalisation of American sociology as a university discipline. In so doing, urban sociologists from Chicago School challenged the idea that conventional scientific laboratories were the only experimental sites by proposing the urban context as the best example of a social laboratory (Gross and Krhon, 2005, Gross, 2009).

One century later such discussion is still very much alive, and geographers are urged to expand their attention to the diverse spaces of experimentation (Powell and Vasudevan, 2007). In answering this call, Last (2012) discusses the emerging tensions around geographical experimentation, while Kullman (2013) provides an overview of how geographers and other social scientists have engaged in diverse empirical sites of experimentation and how they are increasingly involved in experimental geographies. Kullman (2013) tackles the experimental diversity by analysing laboratories in the first instance, then he explains how artistic practices tend to enact experimental spaces and finally, discusses the experimental urban context. Although he mentions a range of 'living laboratories' including eco-housing projects (see Pickerill and Maxey, 2009), there is no specific reference to how alternative spaces could be considered as sites of experimentation and how experiments shape the nature of such spaces; thus, my aim in this paper is to fill this gap by using the example of intentional communities.

Intentional communities are frequently defined as utopian laboratories and as sites where alternative lifestyle are experimented (Sargent, 1994, Metcalf, 1995, Miller, 1998, Sargisson, 2000, Sargent and Sargisson, 2004, Lockyer, 2007, Metcalf, 2014). Indeed, intentional communities could be considered as alternative spaces which, in variegated ways, attempt to create diverse social, economic, ecological and cultural organisations to challenge, resist, or 'heal' some of the issues of contemporary societies. Nowadays around 25,000 community

projects exist in the world (Olivares, 2010, 77) and though definitions of 'intentional community' varies, it is widely accepted that it is a group of people:

> who come from more than one nuclear family and who have chosen to live together to enhance their shared values or for some other mutually agreed upon purpose. (Sargent, 1994, 14-15)

Some scholars are mainly interested in how such communities are models of sustainable living (such as Mulder *et al*., 2006, Lockyer, 2007, Ergas, 2010, Miller et Bentley, 2012) and others in how these spaces are attempting to be precursors of a paradigmatic shift in favour of a new model that recognises human-ecosystem interdependence (Kirby, 2003, Kasper, 2008, Esteves, 2016)[1]. Moreover, Chatterton (2013, 2015) provides a suggested agenda for eco-houses, drawing upon his personal experiences with the LILAC project in Leeds; while Pickerill (2015, 2016) provides rich socio-geographical theorisations of ecological building exploring a wide range of issues from politics to gender. Adopting a different perspective, Jarvis (2013) is interested in housing, and specifically in how countercultural spaces challenge dominant norms of single-family housing and social organisation. Geographical contributions also come from scholars interested in urban intentional communities (i.e. Miles, 2007, Vanolo, 2013) and those interested in new ruralities (Halfacree, 2006, Meijering *et al*., 2007a, Meijering *et al*., 2007b, Fois and Forino, 2014).

Within these accounts, the experimental nature of these communal spaces is often acknowledged, yet generally taken for granted. For instance, studies have remarked how participants have engaged in experimentation with social enterprises, community-owned land and building (i.e. Andreas and Wagner 2012) and sustainable innovative technologies for reducing energy consumption, building eco-homes or generally being more ecologically efficient (i.e. Fois and Forino, 2014, Pickerill, 2016). However, this paper rather than focusing on *what* is experimented on and how *it differs* from the mainstream culture, it stresses the importance of looking at *how* experimentations are enacted and *how* they affect the community and, overall, the individuals involved. Thus, a specific emphasis will be given to the process of enactment of such alternative spaces; and by enactment, I mean how these

[1] Wagner (2012) provides an exhaustive review and categorization of how intentional communities, and more broadly ecovillages, have been studied in social sciences.

intentional communities are "put into practice", how they "take place", and how they "act" their utopian ideals "out" (Oxford English Dictionary (n.d.)[2]. In so doing, I then turn to discuss how utopian studies are linked to intentional communities and how utopianism can offer an interesting approach to study the experimental enactment of such spaces.

Intentional communities and utopia(nism)

Utopias are fundamentally linked with the imaginary of alternative spaces. Tom Moylan (1986), who coined the term 'critical utopias', stresses their main function: criticising contemporaneous systems and proposing new alternatives. The first link between utopian studies and intentional communities emerged with Fourier (1772-1837) and Owen (1771-1858) who not only imagined a utopian socialist society, but sought to concretely implement their projects. Fourier established Brook Farm in Massachusetts (US) in 1841 and Owen built New Lanark in Scotland and New Harmony in the US in the early 19th century (Friesen and Friesen 2004). Unlike Fourier's orientation towards an agricultural society, Owen was interested in the development of a fairer industrial society based on economic communalism. Since then, utopian studies, alongside communal studies[3], have been one of the most common frameworks used by academics to explain intentional communities and these in turn have largely been regarded as one of the main drivers towards the experimentation of utopian imaginaries in the real world.

One of the first scholars who explicitly studied intentional communities as utopian spaces was Kanter (1972). She argued that it is the dissatisfaction with the established order that prompts the search for an ideal space where people can seek refuge from the problems and issues of present society. Despite recognising the potential of intentional communities, Kanter (1972) and Zablocki (1980) pointed out the difficulties faced by these communities to survive in the long term, and furthermore, to create a significant change in society. Arthur Bestor doubted that communal settlements could be adequately technologically sophisticated to survive the modern age, whist other communal scholars have showed how

[2] For more info on the process of utopian enactment from an organisational perspective, see for example Parker (2002).

[3] Although I draw upon some key contributions from communal studies, this paper stays focussed and mainly expands on the connections between utopianism and intentional communities.

intentional communities have persisted in the twentieth century (Miller 1998) and have been continuing in the twenty-first century (Ben-Rafael *et al*., 2013). Pitzer (1989, 2009) justifies such persistence through the theory of 'developmental communalism' suggesting that communal living is a universal social mechanism used to promote social change in all times due to its ability to adjust to the new realities. Building upon Pitzer, Lockyer (2009) uses instead the concept of 'transformative utopianism' to further explain how these communities have the capacity to learn from past communal experiences. He argues to move beyond evaluations on successes or failures and to "recognize the transformative potential of the ongoing process of utopian striving that plays out across generations, historical eras and the boundaries of individual intentional communities" (2009, 6). Thus, Lockyer uses transformative utopianism to discuss how the communal movement is consequent, resilient, and overall persistent[4].

Utopianism is helpful in understanding the ongoing process of the wider communal movements, but can be useful also to inform the processual internal dynamics of intentional communities. More recent conceptualisations of utopia move from the proposal of a perfect place to a desirable world. According to Levitas (1990, 8) "the emphasis has changed from the presentation of finished perfection to a more open exploration in which the construction of the individual, and […] the question of another way of being, has become the central issue". Sargent, strongly influenced by Levitas, distinguishes between utopia and utopia*nism* (1994). For Sargent, utopianism is a social phenomenon inherent in the life of human beings, it is the act of dreaming of a world that, despite not being perfect, could be better than the one existing in the present. These new conceptualisations of utopia open up a different understanding of intentional communities. They are not conceived anymore as perfect places, but instead as microcosms where it is possible to dream differently and to experiment with alternative ways of living that could potentially bring change in the world (Sargent, 2006).

[4] Pitzer (2009, 18) takes the example of the Utopian Owenite movement that began in the UK, spread to the US and although it came to an end, "[it] had a hand in helping to abolish slavery in America, securing women's rights, establishing public schools and libraries, and creating the Smithsonian Institution".

In line with these recent conceptualisations that centralise the methodological function of utopias, Sargisson (1996, 2000, 2007) brings a new understanding of intentional communities by providing a utopian feminist approach. She defines transgressive utopianism as something that "transgresses, negates and destroys things that confine it. And, in doing so, it generates a space in which something different can occur: a utopian space. […] It is, above all, resistant to closure and it celebrates processes over product (2000:3)". According to Sargisson (2000), intentional communities are recognised as a body of people that experiments with these transgressive paradigmatic shifts. Besides stressing the political function of intentional communities, Sargisson stresses another key aspect of utopianism – its processual nature.

Influenced by the post-structural turn and the crisis of representation, in the twenty-first century, utopia(nism) is a radically evolved concept compared to the previous century; "the content of the alternative society, the end or goal, […] is problematized, made flawed and provisional and processual" (Garforth 2009, 18). Such processual nature of utopianism opens up to new directions which must have some implications for understanding intentional communities and moreover alternative spaces. Drawing upon some key scholars that look at utopianism through the lenses of non-representational theory (Anderson, 2002, Anderson 2006a, Kraftl, 2007, Garforth, 2009), I propose a threefold typology that I consider crucial for uncovering the experimental enactment of alternative spaces: 1. Everyday practices; 2. Affects and emotions; 3. Disruptive and unsettling nature.

Non-representational accounts are influenced by Ernest Bloch's (1986) notorious contribution 'The Principle of Hope'. With his concept of 'Not Yet', he emphasises the on-going nature of utopianism, as something that 'is becoming' but at the same time is 'not yet become', characterising utopianism as open-ended, immanent and embedded in everyday life. In searching the immanent expressions of utopianism, Anderson (2002) focuses on the everyday practices and events of the lived experience by looking at common ways to use recorded music to feel better. Similarly, Cooper (2014) centralises the importance of 'practice' in order to understand the actualization of everyday utopias. Her contribution however is not focused on the enactment of alternative spaces and especially she makes clear how her case studies differ from intentional communities. My first argument here is that in considering utopianism as an immanent process that is strongly embedded in

everyday life, an analysis of alternative enactment should consider the lived experiences and community practices that are enabled in such spaces.

This brings us to the second point that emphasises the affective, emotional and embodied experiences that take place when pursuing utopian desires, or in other words, when alterity is experimentally enacted. Affect is the capacity of a body to affect and to be affected; it is intrinsically relational as it depends on the encounter with another body (where another body can be anything) (Anderson 2006, 2014). Affects are considered pre-cognitive compared to emotions which are instead considered cognitive, personal and subjective and as the subsequent understanding of the affective experience. In investigating the affective experience of listening to recorded music, Anderson (2002, 223) explains how this was linked to a qualitatively different moment where people started to feel "something better". Garforth (2009, 19) suggests that the core of utopianism and, therefore the search for alterity, can be identified in the affective dimension and adds that arts and their affective, embodied and non-representative capacities become a possible direction for exploring the present utopianism. Recreational events, artistic practices, aesthetic medias, architecture, playful activities can thus be functional for capturing the utopian enactment of alternative spaces. Which sort of affects and emotions are generated when engaging in experimental community practices?

The third point that emerges from non-representational accounts relates to the unsettling, discomforting and unhomely experiences that practising or experiencing utopianism can generate (Kraftl, 2007). Utopias, communal experiences, ruralities and arts are generally represented through homely, safe, comforting, stable and even idyllic imaginaries; however Kraftl (2007) argues that post-structural utopian thoughts can deconstruct such idyllic representation of utopias by analysing its performative and affective capacities. He explains how utopian visions can be unsettling for those outside the alternative spaces enacted, mainly because the aim of such spaces is indeed to transgress cultural norms and boundaries. Yet it equally can be unsettling for those practising utopianism, as the open-endedness of such utopian desires, the hope for the future and the uncertainty as to which direction these might take, can lead to feelings of anxiety. Anxiety is not necessarily understood with a negative connotation, but inherent in the utopian infinite potential (Kraftl, 2007). Inspired by

Kraft, I then wonder: what is the nature of the utopian enactment, what impact can it have and to what extent can it be unsettling?

In this paper, these new theoretical trends are originally embraced for understanding the enactment of alternative spaces by looking at community experimental practices, their affective and emotional impacts and to what extent they dismantle idyllic notions of utopianism. Similarly to utopianism, experiments are intrinsically open-ended, or they should be if experimenters want "to generate and register new associations and differences in the world" (Kullman, 2013, 882). Yet, when doing experiments with the social, the unknown results matter but are no more important than the process. I argue that by using utopianism in understanding such social experimentations, it demands a certain emphasis on the social methodology used – to enact a utopian desire, a fairer solidary society, an alternative space – and the impact that such practices can have on the affective, emotional and embodied dimensions of the human beings involved. Understanding the experimental nature of such spaces can then allow the dismantling of those assumptions that predominately stress the failure of such alternative practices, or point out the limited impact on a wider scale, thus underestimating how social change is rather embedded in the process and in the utopian methodology itself. Thus, the next section turns to the actual methodology used in this investigation.

Methodology

This research adopts an ethnographic approach to investigate the experimental enactment of the intentional community of Damanhur (see Crang and Cook, 2007). The main criteria to select the intentional community were: 1. an experience of at least 20 years of shared community living; 2. more than 20 residents; 3. open to receive and collaborate with researchers for at least two weeks, that is considered the minimum time for a micro-ethnography (Wolcott, 1990 in Bryman, 2008). Once the selection has been made[5], "[g]aining access to the field is the most difficult phase in the entire process of ethnographic research" (Gobo, 2008, 118). Offering my time for volunteering activities within the community was the negotiation enacted in order to gain access (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). The role I was

[5] More on the selection process, accessibility and positionality can be found elsewhere (--- 2017).

seeking to assume was both as a researcher and volunteer. An exchange in which I was not only taking up their time for research purposes, but also giving my time for community activities, was a fairer and more ethical way to conduct fieldwork. Additionally, this allowed a better integration within the community and so enabled me to conduct simultaneously the participant observation as informal conversation with the members, while volunteering.

My short-ethnographic investigation in Damanhur started in April 2012. In the first weeks I was based in Dishna[6], one of the 26 social units of Damanhur called *nuclei* (nucleus-community)[7]. At the time of the fieldwork[8] Dishna was home to 21 Damanhurians, four of whom were children. During this period, I was involved in Dishna community activities such as helping in the construction of an earth-bag house, cleaning, planting vegetables and any other activities required. As an ethnographic study, the main research method was *participant observation* accompanied by the use of a daily *field diary* (see Crang and Cook, 2007). This was an essential tool for recording formal meetings and informal conversations that I participated in, facts and events that I observed, and emotions and feelings that I felt. Additionally, 30 *semi-structured interviews* were conducted with Damanhurian residents. Because the community counted more than 600 members, it was necessary to select the respondents in a reasonable manner. I identified three main groups: residents (all the 17 adult residents of Dishna social unit), political actors (residents who have specific positions and roles within the federation) and economic actors (residents who are responsible for a business in the Damanhurian commercial centre *Dh Crea*).

In investigating alternative ways to extend my visit, I found out that in May 2012, Damanhur in collaboration with Gaia education and GEN (Global Ecovillage Network) were holding a course called 'Ecovillage Design Education' (EDE). The aim of the full-immersion 4-week course was to provide a specific training on the enactment of an ecovillage exploring the four dimensions of sustainability: social, economic, spiritual/worldview and ecological. Even if the general program needed to be approved by GEN, each EDE is strongly embedded in the community culture, habits and rules and the local residents design and deliver the content

[6] In order to maintain anonymity I have changed the names of the respondents and the name of the Damanhurian social unity where I was based.
[7] Each social unit tends to be representative of the Damanhur population (old and new members, different nationalities and mixed gender and ages).
[8] All the information reported in this project is relative to when the fieldwork took place.

according to their community lifestyle and practices. The course was taught by Damanhurian residents with the contribution in two modules of two external GEN leaders and was held in a house near to another Damanhurian social unit.

We were in total 13 participants from Italy, Brazil, Romania, Turkey, Germany, Latvia, France, Peru, Spain and USA ranging in age from 20s to 60 years old. There was an internal Damanhurian participant, and I was the only academic researcher in the group and the only Italian. Generally, the other participants were external practitioners who were planning to build or were already involved in other sustainable communities or organisations. The EDE course was very intense and I had to reassess the way of conducting research, and overall my positionality. We, the participants, were in close contact with each other for the whole 4 weeks. On 8th May (the third day into the EDE course), I wrote in my field-diary how my position has changed compared with the first weeks spent in Dishna, and how I was feeling as a full participant. Experience is a process that is becoming, always in movement, in transition and escapes rules of representations (McCormack, 2010). Although my experience is not representative since my feelings, emotions, perceptions are my own; I argue that through engaging with an auto-ethnographic approach it is possible to further perceive the experimental nature of Damanhurian enactment and more precisely to understand the embodied and affective unsettledness that the utopian process can generate. McCormack's (2010) contribution prompts us to reduce the distance between experience and experimentation. Drawing upon John Dewey and William James, he explains how experimentation can further be understood through experience and how experience is intrinsically experimental. Thus, my EDE experience is understood as a process of ongoing Damanhurian experimentation, allowing me to integrate the primary data collected from the semi-structured interviews with some experiential auto-ethnographic fragments. Before proceeding to the empirical analysis, the next section contextualises Damanhur.

Damanhur

Damanhur is a community of approximately 1000 residents located in north-west Italy (Olivares, 2010). It is approximately 40 kilometres north of Turin and 14 kilometres from Ivrea, in the subalpine geographical and historical area of Canavese, in the Valchiusella valley. According to Damanhurians, the spiritual leader Oberto Airaudi, called Falco, had a vision of a

new civilization where inhabitants "enjoyed a meaningful existence in which all people worked for the common good" (Ananas and Pesco, 2009,5). In 1977 Falco with an initial group purchased land in Baldissero Canavese and a farmhouse in Vidracco. A settlement was established and named after the Egyptian city Damanhur which means City of the Sun (Berzano, 1998). On 26th December 1979, the Damanhur community was inaugurated (Introvigne, 1999)[9].

Established almost 40 years ago, Damanhur is now an intentional community, the main purpose of which is "the freedom and reawakening of the human being as a divine, spiritual, and material principle" (Ananas and Pesco, 2009, 3). Each intentional community is differently organised and thus, Damanhur has a unique social structure. It is established on four main pillars called bodies: 1.the School of Meditation – which is the Damanhur spiritual school of initiation; 2.the Social Body – which represents the intentional community; 3.the Game of Life – a social institution which aims to implement a dynamic development and break with rigidity and conformity; and 4. *Tecnarcato* – a sort of spiritual counselling which supports individuals' paths.

Since the beginning, the Damanhurian social body has gone through intense processes of experimentations. While the number of residents grew, and it was not possible to acquire adjacent territories, Damanhur started to spread across the Canavese rather than occupying a discrete piece of land (see figure 1). These geographical arrangements supported the idea of increasing the number of smaller communities while also reducing the number of people in each of them. Besides the re-scaling process, while Damanhur was growing, living communally was becoming very challenging, not only for spatial reasons, but also for social reasons. Testing and documenting the results of social experiments over more than 30 years, Damanhurians have noticed that the critical number for each social unit is from 10 people (min critical number) to 25 (max critical number – including children). According to this theory, if in a social unit there are more than 25 people the human group tends to generate division within the community, creating "small parties" which become "a community in the community" (Damanhur internal document) and "preventing the fluidity of human relationships" (Naos, public relation officer). On the other hand, if the minimum number of

[9] It is not my intention to present a full historical overview of Damanhur, for more information see Berzano (1998) and Del Re and Macioti (2013), Palmisano and Pannofino (2014).

10 is not reached, a sense of community is absent, making it difficult to generate community initiatives.

While at the beginning there was a centralised system of governance, called 'military government' by the residents due to the lack of consultation to the wider community and the rapidity of the decision making process, nowadays the federation has developed a more democratic system (Electra, resident and EDE organiser) (see figure 2). There is a decentralized structure where the social body is divided into smaller social units (nucleus-communities) spread across several municipalities including Baldissero Canavese, Vidracco, Vistrorio, Issiglio, Cuceglio, Castellamonte and Foglizzo. Each nucleus thus comprises between 10 to 25 people. It is organized as a family and generally the group shares the same house or cluster of houses and uses common facilities and areas (such as kitchen, bathrooms, living room). In 2012, 26 nucleus-communities existed and each one focused on specific projects. Though this might seem an ultimate social structure, the next section explains how Damanhur's experimentation is an open-ended process.

Experimenting with the community

Community experimentation is at the heart of Damanhur enactment and results from diverse social, economic and artistic practices. I will discuss here three of the many examples of community experimental practices. To start with, the enactment of social units as nucleus-communities is the result of years of adaptation and experimentation. As Chara (Resident and Regent of Dishna nucleus) stated "*we are basically a living laboratory*". Damanhurians experiment with their own social structure mainly because they believe that to sustain their community it is necessary to embrace change rather than resist it. Drawing upon Pitzer, Madden (2013) stresses that the only way for communal laboratories such as Damanhur to survive is to adopt a dynamic experimentation attitude.

By further investigating Damanhur's social structure, it emerges that though nucleus-communities have been adopted as ideal social units for living together, they can become problematic because the nucleus-community *"has grown so much in organization and specialisation that there was a risk of closing down, a risking that you within your group think only of your small territory and could not see [the rest]" (*Chara*).* In order to overcome such limits, Damanhurians launched several experiments such as the New Life programme with

the aim to disorder the existing social structure. This was a new programme launched in 2010 where external people could join the nucleus-communities and experience Damanhurian everyday life for a 3-month period. Over the first 2 years around 200 guests were enrolled in the New Life (Syrma, resident for 15 years). Chara explains how it was intentionally created to break up the '*rigid*' structure of the nucleus-communities. The idea was to provoke a '*flood*' inside the nucleus '*that splits open the banks of the dam and naturally would have created new streams that in a spontaneous way would have formed a new order*' (Chara). She identifies the New life programme as an '*invasion*' from the world into the nucleus-communities, but also as a successful attempt to renew the established social structure. Kaus (Capitan of a region and previously King Guide) explains further why Damanhurians are so concerned to constantly engage in processes of experimentation:

> *We got to the point where things worked very well but they were going on for too many years and then eventually became a habit. The moment things become a habit they cannot be auto-renewable. The renewal and habit are two things that do not marry each other. Also one of the four bodies of Damanhur which is called the Game of Life, is created exactly with the aim to fight habits. Then when things work well but maybe are working for years, years, years at some point they must be dismantled.*

Processes of ordering and disordering are consequently enacted through experimental practices to avoid the danger that established structures become habits. During the interviews it often emerged how Damanhurians emphasise change rather than habits; "*one of the few dogmas we have, if not the only, is change. Life changes constantly*" (Electra). Habits are considered obstacles to social innovation, expansion and creativity. According to Harrison (2000, 512), "habit would involve doing what we expected, habit gives technical competence", namely they instigate certainty and regularity and might have the capacity to eliminate doubts. Thus, this can lead us to not question the 'reality' and to take embodied and routinized daily practices as the norm. However, when habits are disrupted there is "the potential to make sense and so create new forms of life rather than adopting them" (Harrison, 2000, 509). In other words, the disturbance of habits forces human beings to make sense of their contextual circumstances, to create new possibilities and to enact "new spaces of action" (*ibid*, 498) and overall new 'styles of life'. Thus, it appears that Damanhurians

attempt to implement a 'style of life' when by disrupting their habits they make "new forms of sense" (*ibid*, 513) and open up to new possibilities. These dynamic and experimental social re-orderings have an unsettling nature: when a new order is deployed for the community enactment, it becomes the limit to the enactment itself, thus it needs to be disordered.

The social units and the launch of the New Life program are one of the many examples of community experimentation. Since the 1980s, Damanhurians have established the Game of Life to facilitate such experimental process. Several people are elected annually as representatives of this body to organize projects and games that aim to bring change to the society, fighting against habits and rigid social structures. The creation of the Game of Life was strictly linked with the *Olio Caldo* (Hot Oil) experiment launched in 1985 to promote self-sufficiency by eating, consuming and using only self-made products (Nashira resident for 19 years).

The self-sufficiency experimentation took place in an old ruin in a defined Damanhur territory isolated from the rest of the Damanhur community where residents took turns for one or more weeks. For instance, they could only use self-made clothes and shoes from the available (mainly natural) materials, eat what they were able to grow, sat and sleep in self-made chairs and mattresses. Kurah (resident for 20 years) one of the few residents who participated in *Olio Caldo* for around one year, affirms that this was the most fascinating yet challenging experience of his life. The aim was to be able to live simply, to make the best use of the few resources available and overall to stimulate creativity and innovation. By eliminating the comfort, disrupting their habits, residents were forced to search for 'new styles of life' and open up to new possibilities by creatively engaging with the limited resources available. Residents emphasise how, among other things, they learnt to produce cheese and butter, to generate electricity by pedalling a bike, and to make shoes from wood. Such experiments therefore gave life to diverse initiatives that stimulate Damanhurian organic agricultural production (i.e. oil and wine) and renewable energy devices.

Fighting habits and provoking change have the ultimate aim of creating new spaces of possibilities where social innovation and creativity can be encouraged. I thus suggest that these community experimentations generate alternative spaces of 'vernacular creativity' where everyone can engage with creative everyday practices (Hallam and Ingold, 2007, Edensor *et al*., 2009, Gauntlett, 2011). According to Edensor *et al*. (2009), vernacular

creativity seeks to re-conceptualise creativity and to disconnect it from its bond with conventional forms of innovation and competition. In these spaces, creativity does not belong to a privileged class, nor is it enacted predominantly for generating economic value.

Experimental vernacular creativity becomes further visible within Damanhurian artistic practices. Artistic practices are considered a crucial field of experimentation for their capacity of "crafting new geographies, new modes of collectiveness and new ethical sensibilities" (Kullman 2013, 883). The most relevant experimental artistic work of Damanhur is the Temple of Humankind. For more than 20 years, Damanhurians have been involved in the construction of their spiritual centre (see figure 3). Built underground, for years the temple was hidden from the public until authorities discovered it in 1992 when an ex-Damanhurian citizen informed the local authorities (see Del Re and Macioti, 2013). Such an event drew political and mass-media attention and Damanhur became famous for its underground temple that occupied around 6,000 cubic meters on five underground levels, it counted around "150 meters of corridors, 400 square meters of paintings, 350 square meters of wall and the floor mosaics" (Ananas *et al*., 2006, 9). The temple is both the heart and the symbolic representation of Damanhur spiritual philosophy (see figures 4). It is now open to the public and visitors from all over the world come to see it. Yet, when Damanhurians started the Temple, they could not imagine what they were able to build and therefore, what they could achieve (Kurah, resident for 30 years).

> *The temple is our baby, our life, our finest work, it is a source of pride because it is part of our growth. Through the temple we have uncovered talents, transformed people.* (Porrima, resident for 16 years)

The Temple of the Humankind is the most emblematic example of how artistic experiments play a key role in Damanhur, yet it is not exclusive – figures 5 show how Damanhur is shaped by sculptures and paintings made by Damanhurians. Artistic practices are crucial for the material and immaterial enactment of the community yet mainly they are significant in this context for their capacity to shape experimental artistic sites and challenging "prevailing artistic conventions" by understanding the artistic process as a collective (see Vail and Hollands, 2013, 545). Each resident has been involved in its construction. For instance, the paintings, sculptures and the different sections of the temple do not specify who designed what. The individualistic dimension seems to disappear to leave spaces of collective forms of

artistic expression. Arguably some individuals are more talented than others and some are professional artists, yet Damanhur experimentations attempt to cultivate the creative side of each individual. Yet, implementing such experimental space is not smooth, comfortable and 'utopic' in the traditional sense.

Experimenting with the self

Damanhurian experimentations do not only unsettle and disorder the social structure and community habits, I argue that experimental enactment also works in unsettling the self. Kraftl (2007, 124) encourages us to understand the impacts that unsettling utopias can have by looking at "performative styles of encountering utopianism", while Garforth (2009, 19) suggests putting "the emphasis […] on the body, on the feeling and sensible experience". The EDE course organised for externals aimed to give a taste of Damanhur social experimentation. I argue that by using auto-ethnographic data, it is possible to get better insights of the effects of such embodied experimental practices. Betria, one of the Dishna residents, stressed the importance of experiencing the community's practices besides researching it:

> "you are doing research about us, but now you are *experiencing* yourself what does it mean to be part of Damanhur community. The EDE is our temporary community *experiment*".

During the four weeks there were variegated techniques of social experimentation that were often oriented around getting to know each other by creating social bonds between the participants and cultivating a cohesive temporary community. This could involve presenting ourselves in unconventional circumstances – standing up in the middle of a circle made by the other participants and turning around and trying to maintain eye contact with each individual. Though some people were more comfortable than others, a certain level of anxiety could be perceived in the eyes of those who were going to present, as it required a certain level of exposure. The embodied nature – standing up in front of a circle of people – was what made the activity challenging and unsettling compared to, for instance, a more orthodox presentation styles.

On another occasion, we were outdoors and divided into pairs. One person was supposed to guide the other who was blindfolded with the purpose of experiencing nature. The aim was stimulating a different sensory experience – void of vision (see figures 6). The experiment went beyond experiencing nature through the other person, but rather it aimed to build trust through creating an affective and embodied encounter with the other. Being placed in the middle of a circle or experiencing nature blindfolded through another person, made the individual feel more aware of his/her own presence as well as the others' and the surrounding context. The utopian unsettledness and discomfort provoked through experimentations aim not only to disorder the social organisation to be open to new possibilities but the social methodologies used attempt to push participants to live outside conventional social norms, individuals' habits, ways of living and relating.

Regarding artistic practices, the EDE course leader from Damanhur asked participants to create a clay sculpture based on the theme of 'the embrace'. It was the first time that I had worked with clay and I was worried about not being able to create something meaningful. Some of the other participants were similarly concerned about their artistic abilities. Though such a process stimulated individuals' creativity, as Miller (2016) points out, the lack of technical knowledge increased the chance that things could go wrong. This clearly increased feelings of anxiety and unsettledness yet equally the desire to just try, to give it a chance. The following day, we had to paint a circular paper on the theme 'dream'. Figure 7 shows the start of the process involved in the creation of the artwork. Each one started to paint one section of the paper, but at some point we had to move to another side (see figure 8). So another person continued the painting. Initially, this generated a personal feeling of frustration and a sense of attachment to 'my painting', it challenged my ego. While I was painting another section, I continued glancing at my previous section, looking at how other people changed it. When moving from one side of the paper to the other, I could no longer recognise 'my painting' any more. 'My painting' had become the painting of someone else and vice versa. Finally, when the painting was complete, we had to position the sculpture made the day before over a section of the painting (see figure 9). Reflecting with the group afterwards, these feelings of frustration and attachment were common among participants in the initial phase of the painting. However, despite the discomfort during the artistic process,

those feelings turned to a sense of satisfaction and enjoyment as we collectively produced something.

The aim of intentional communities is to build a communal space where people can know, rely on and support each other. The methodological approaches used to build such a temporary utopian space are not necessarily homely, comfortable or pleasant, but can rather be unsettling and discomforting especially when trying to break with personal and social habits. Garforth (2009, 19) stresses how "utopian affect and feeling promise (or threaten) to disrupt or reorganise from the bottom up who we think we are". The EDE had purposely the intention to shake up the individual, to become more aware of the relational embodied experience. Yet, more widely, I suggest that this approach reflects Damanhurian culture. In touching upon the four dimensions of sustainability, each EDE course must mirror the community enactment and offer a temporary experience of the local everyday practices. Alhena (resident for 11 years) emphasises the unsettledness she faced during the first year in Damanhur; her initial experience was an "*attack on the ego*" that "*collapsed the image I had about myself*" and "*question points in which I thought I was strong and solid*". In this transformational process, she felt "*completely rootless, emotionally disoriented*" and had to reconsider her priorities and values. While Damanhurians underline the challenges in living in such provoking social contexts, they outlined their enthusiasm, feelings of freedom and the benefits in embracing the experimental nature of Damanhur. As Nunki (resident for 11 years) explains, "*our job is to experiment, to be constantly predisposed to these dynamics*". Thus, the social becomes a field of experimentation to be able to live in harmony with the others, with nature and accept that "*nothing is eternal*" (Electra).

By reporting these affective and embodied experiences, this study reveals how Damanhur provokes and generates unsettling spaces of collective practice to encourage individuals to express their potential creativity. In these spaces, I argue social bonds are reinforced and the community is enacted, individuals' egos are challenged and often pushed out of their comfort zone manifesting often unexpected talents. Ultimately, this section reinforces the argument that experimental alternative spaces have the capacities of unsettling the self, and remarks that such unsettling experimental spaces offer the ground for creative, latent and collective possibilities to be manifested.

Conclusions

In this paper I considered the intentional community of Damanhur to study the experimental enactment of alternative spaces. Firstly, in social laboratories like Damanhur, the alterity does not rest on a specific established order but rather in its experimental ability of ordering, disordering and re-ordering. In other words, the alterity – and the longevity – dwells in the capacity of unsettling the social structure, of disrupting the habits, and for pushing individuals out of their comfort zone. This provides a new understanding of the processual nature of intentional communities, by advancing previous conceptualisations that consider utopian spaces as reproducing defined, 'perfect' and fixed societies. Intentional communities or utopian practices are far from comfortable, settled and predictable but rather by studying their enactment, the processuality, dynamism and open-endedness of such spaces have been revealed. While non-representational approaches have alluded to the unsettlingness of utopianism (Kraftl 2007), this paper has grounded such conceptualisations, and explored and extended the debates on intentional communities and, more broadly, alternative spaces.

Secondly, this paper has explored the affective, emotional and embodied experiences that such utopian experimentations can generate. In grounding the analysis, this paper originally shows not only the disordering, unsettling and creative nature of alternative enactment but also how community experimentations have an inherent capacity of unsettling the self, thus generating space for new collective possibilities. For instance, the paper revealed how experimenting with the social can mean to create spaces where different interactions between individuals can take place, where trust can be reinforced through embodied activities, where individuals learn to be part of a collective by reducing the distance with the others. It also showed how these new possibilities can emerge from forms of vernacular creativity that stimulate creative talents and from collaborative experimentations that generate innovative production practices or unpredictable artefacts such as the Damanhurian temple. Thus, I argue that a methodological approach that focuses on the experiential is vital in understanding the ongoing experimental enactment of these spaces.

Thirdly, studies on alternative spaces often mention their experimental nature, however scholars have been more attentive to questioning and uncovering alterity in the present society (see Fuller *et al.*, 2010). In addressing the call that encourages us to pay more attention to experimental geographies (Powell and Vasudevan, 2007), I argue the need to

explore more in-depth the overlooked experimental nature of alternative spaces and their process of enactment. I engaged with utopian studies not only because they provide one of the main common frameworks used to conceptualise intentional communities, but also because I argue, in dialogue with non-representational thinking, they can offer an original approach for studying the experimental enactment of alternative spaces. In paying attention to the utopian methodological function (Levitas 1990), utopianism stresses the process and the open-endedness rather than the outcome and therefore requires considering the socio-experimental practices that capture such enactments. However even if recent non-representational understandings have embraced a more practical, affective and unsettling approach of utopianism (Anderson, 2002, Anderson 2006a, Kraftl, 2007, Garforth, 2009), they fail to specifically address the enactment of intentional communities and do not provide a more in-depth theorization of experimental alternative spaces. In this paper, I have overcome these gaps and showed how utopianism can be useful to investigate the experimental enactment of alternative spaces and the emotional, affective and embodied experiences generated. This is fundamental to moving from a cynical attitude that mainly considers counter-cultural initiatives for social change as ephemeral or ineffective towards an approach that sees social change embedded in the process and in the utopian methodology itself.

Finally, alternative studies have often remarked how alternative spaces and practices tend to be overwhelmed by capitalist society emphasising their difficulty in persisting in the long term (North, 2010, Jonas, 2010). Studies generally focus on their capacity to make a 'meaningful' change in society, to influence policies and to raise large scale awareness (Amin *et al*., 2003). However, focusing on experimentation allows understanding alterity as processual, open-ended and a dynamic. It permits to go beyond failure and achievements and to explore the provocative and disordering nature of alternative enactment. This can motivate scholars to explore the impact that such experimentation produce not necessarily in the wider society, not only in the smaller communities, but also in the individuals' life. I argue that the emphasis when investigating alternative spaces should also be on the capacity to *affect* the individual, namely by expanding the individual awareness into new ways of being, connecting and living in society. To conclude, utopianism provides an appropriate framework to understand how alternative experimentations unsettle and disorder social

structures to enact spaces of new collective possibilities, and how such social experimentations challenge, unsettle and transform the self by studying the affective, emotional and embodied impacts through individuals' experiences. Thus, this paper encourages future scholarship to further understand how social change is initiated from the experimental enactment of utopian desires, how this can be provoked through diverse social, artistic and playful practices and methodologies and how, overall it is embedded in a process of self-transformation.

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